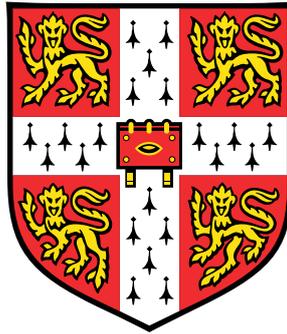


Genomic diversity and speciation in East African cichlid fish



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To Alena and Sasha ...

Declaration

I hereby declare that except where specific reference is made to the work of others, the contents of this dissertation are original and have not been submitted in whole or in part for consideration for any other degree or qualification in this, or any other university. This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration, except where specifically indicated in the text. This thesis does not exceed the length limit of 60,000 words specified by the Biology Degree Committee.

Milan Malinsky
September 2015

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Abstract

Unravelling the genetic basis of functional diversification is fundamental for our understanding of vertebrate evolution and can also have significant implications for animal and human health. Speciation leads to phenotypic diversity by producing new units of evolution - species. In less than five million years, East African cichlids have radiated into thousands of species that differ in craniofacial morphology, pigmentation, behaviour and many other traits. In this thesis, I take advantage of recent advances in DNA sequencing technologies to study the genetic basis of this exceptional diversity. First, as a member of the Cichlid Genome Consortium (CGC), I identified and characterised over 1,000 loci generating microRNAs, non-coding RNA genes that regulate expression and may play a role in the evolution of cichlid traits. Next, at the Sanger Institute, we obtained whole genome sequences of 271 individuals from over 70 species from in and around Lake Malawi. I aligned the data to a reference genome generated by CGC, and used the results to: 1) ascertain the overall levels of genetic variation and allele sharing within and between species; 2) reconstruct relationships between the species; 3) study in detail the genetic causes and consequences of early stages of speciation in Lake Massoko, a small isolated crater lake in southern Tanzania. I found that that the genetic distance between the most diverged Lake Malawi species is surprisingly low, comparable to the distance between two strains of zebrafish, that there are discrepancies between relationships inferred from molecular phylogeny and from traditional taxonomy, and that measurable introgression between species occurs but does not seem to be common. In Lake Massoko, I identified clearly demarcated genomic regions of differentiation between incipient species in sympatry. Interestingly, there are no fixed differences; instead I found a genome-wide pattern with dozens of loci of moderate divergence. With collaborators, we found that alleles in the regions are associated to mate preferences in the laboratory, and genes in the regions are enriched for molecular functions consistent with morphological and sensory system adaptation. To facilitate this work, I constructed whole genome alignments between CGC genome assemblies, assigned ancestral alleles to genetic variants in Lake Malawi, and built a genome browser that can be used to visualise datasets produced by us and

the CGC. The browser website has been visited over 650 times since March 2014. In addition, I developed a new method for genome assembly to reduce problems caused by heterozygosity, taking advantage of mother-father-offspring trio data. I applied this method to obtain *de novo* genome assemblies of three cichlid species, and also three highly heterozygous *Heliconius* butterfly species. These datasets, tools, and findings make significant contributions to evolutionary genetics and will provide a foundation for future research on processes underlying the evolution of phenotypic diversity, especially in cichlids.

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